



Connection and belonging

This fact sheet is part of a series we created with families who've been through tough times to spark hope and new ideas on connecting and caring for each other when things are really difficult.

Definition of 'parent'

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, the term 'parent' encompasses the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child.

Take a moment to think about...



- Who is in your family?
- What values are important to you when it comes to family?

The families we talked to generously shared their ideas on connecting and caring for each other in tough times. They also told us about some of the things that can get in the way of family connection.

What can get in the way of family connection?

Even when we care about each other, connecting within our families can be really hard, especially if your family is experiencing violence or intergenerational disadvantage.

It can be a challenge to maintain relationships when we're struggling financially, or don't have access to supportive community, affordable childcare, or safe and secure housing.

When one of us is sick, struggling with distress, or going through big changes or difficult times, it can mean we are all struggling.

Some other roadblocks are:

Demands on our time and energy

Being a sole parent, having to work long hours, living with disability or chronic illness, demanding care responsibilities and busyness all make connection in families harder to access.

Expectations

Cultural expectations of how parents should be, how families should be, and how children/daughters/sons/siblings should be can also put a lot of pressure on families. And sometimes it even pits us against each other. These 'shoulds' can contribute to shame, guilt and stigma and lead to us being really hard on ourselves and each other. They can make it tougher to see the unique and wonderful things about our loved ones, and to really hear each other.

But no matter the circumstances, we try, we reach out. In big, small and sometimes unseen ways. We work together, celebrate each other and support each other. And we hope our stories and ideas might spark something that helps you in some way.

Take a moment to think about



- What kinds of things is your family experiencing that can make care for and connection with each other harder?
- What might you already be doing to show care for each other, despite the difficulties you have faced?
- Why is showing care important to you?
- Have you noticed your children showing care? What do you appreciate about what it takes for them to do that?

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Family to me is someone I can dislike a lot, and still chill out with at the same time. I can walk in and eat food out of the cupboard and they won't blink an eyelid. "In your bones you belong together at that time" is what I see family as.

IRIS, 15 YEARS OLD, IN FOSTER CARE

Stories of families caring in tough moments

Just doing what you can

'Up until a year ago I was so emotionally detached it wasn't funny. The only way I was able to connect was just to do things. Just be at the park with the children, just to listen to them talk to me. Everything was a "just" without an emotion. Sometimes it was just taking a photo of myself to send to my son [in out of home care]: there was no reason like I was happy, or I thought I looked nice, it was just to take a photo so he would see his mother. If I sum it up, it's just being a robot and "doing".'

Caring looks different from day to day

'Caring for a child with a disability when you're exhausted, just so tired, can be really hard. It can look a lot different to the way you connect with your child when you're not exhausted. On a really bad day, your best will look different to on a really good day. You're not failing just because it's a s*** day.'

Ideas for showing care and connecting

So when the odds are stacked against us, how do we show care in our families? Let's hear from some families about ways they found to care for each other in tough times.

Showing care with words

'I tell my kids that they are wanted, loved, a part of the family, and that they belong in our family. I want them to understand that even when things are hard, they matter to us.'

A 'talking stick'

'When my kids were little, they had a lot to say, and there was a lot going on and they didn't always feel they had a voice. So we used to make time to talk and we had a 'talking stick' and whoever had the stick got to talk, and everyone else had to listen.'

Writing notes

'I used to connect with my kids through notes and writing. Sometimes it was just a love heart drawn on a scrap of paper in their lunchboxes.'

Sticking together as a team

'We sit down and talk over a meal. Sometimes we call a family meeting, talk about the situation. Try and be supportive. It can be hard sometimes – there's misunderstandings. Active listening is an important part of that. Allowing them to be able to speak and feel comfortable and safe, try and say, "OK, well let's figure this out. It might be irritating, it might be frustrating, but at the end of the day, this is our little unit and we've gotta support each other." When it's hard, I think back to my childhood and how I wasn't listened to – it immediately flicks a switch. Knowing I can be supportive and break that intergenerational cycle, that's what gives me the strength and the courage to just meet things head on.'

Hearing painful as well as positive feelings

'If someone is doing something wrong, I might be angry, I'll be upset and I might have a reaction. But if I have the knowledge that OK, that family member might have something else going on, might have had a bad day ... that makes a big difference. That makes the connection easier in a difficult time. And it's important to listen, with an open mind, without judgement. Especially when our family share with us about difficult or taboo things. You can listen with your ears and still not hear. You've gotta listen with your body. Show that you're listening. You don't always have to make a comment on it.'

Communicating

'If one family member is having a difficult time due to illness or distress, I usually start off with things like, "I'm not sure if you've noticed but mum's not feeling well..." or "I was wondering if you want to know more about what's been going on...?" I make sure I explain to my kids that it's not their fault. Sometimes we have challenges that

are hard to manage – sometimes we need space and sometimes we need more caring connection. Keeping this communication open helps kids know what to expect, and that I'm aware of what's going on and working to manage it. And sometimes I offer different options like, "Maybe you'd like to spend some time with me/Mum/sibling?" Caring can come in different ways, so I might suggest just sitting together, or reading together, or small acts of kindness for each other like taking turns making snacks.'

'When things were really tough, like when we've been in a refuge or the situation was really bad, that's when I've been the frankest and most authentic. I've just laid it out. Being aware of their age and not telling them every detail, but respecting that the kids have the ability to be a part of it. We're in it together, and they have the ability to work through it.'

Accepting feelings and being responsible for our behaviour

'Be accepting of the situation and the effects it has, and have empathy for yourself and your family. Knowing when hard stuff is going on, there's gonna be blow-ups. I might lose my temper or the kids might lose their temper, and that's just how it is because we're all struggling. I remember one time in particular, I just really lost it badly with one of my kids. Afterwards I apologised. Never once has my son said anything except for: "Mum. It's OK. You know, we were going through a hard time." It is what is. Life is c**p sometimes and you've just gotta roll with it. And if you act badly, make amends.'

Being in nature together

'At least once a week we'd go somewhere in nature and just hang out. It was unorganised, it was open, it was free, we didn't have distractions. The kids could kind of go and do what they wanted or have time with each other, or they could come and talk to me if they wanted. It's almost like a mini holiday, you go and whatever's going on, it's still gonna be there when you get back, but in that moment [in nature] that's just where you are. It could be even as simple as going to your local green space, park or playground, taking a mini picnic. One of my kids when he was younger, every morning we used to go out with binoculars and birdwatch. I think that's been very much a glue that's helped our family. They didn't always wanna go. But it was always great.'



GRACE, 9 YEARS OLD

Routines together

'When my kids were really little, we would read books to them every night before bed. We had that routine set up. And then my mum got really sick and died and I just lost it. That was not a good time and I felt like a not good enough parent. But the book reading every night was something that we kept doing and I think that that was really important for the kids, for feeling cared for and their safety. And I'm really grateful that we'd started it when things were easy. It carried us through the hard time.'

Spending time together

'When they were little kids, financially we had no money, and my wife was quite sick and away a lot. So we tried to do stuff as a family and show an interest in what the kids enjoyed. We got the kids playing backyard cricket and we'd do picnics together. Family dinners together, try to have a bit of fun. Just so we'd have that unity. Sometimes making someone else feel better makes you feel better.'

Showing an interest

'Sometimes our kids are interested in things that we aren't. It is a real skill to be interested in a topic/movie/video game/idea that our kids love but we don't. It can help instead think of it as taking an interest in their excitement.'

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When it's movie night I go on the couch, and I feel connected to Mum because I cuddle up to her. It makes me feel warm.

MADISON, 8 YEARS OLD, PERAMANGK AND KAURNA COUNTRY

Helping siblings connect

'Siblings can become disconnected for lots of reasons. Finding activities they all enjoy (such as video games) or going for a family drive, can help to start conversations that might otherwise not happen.'



Problem solving together

‘Everyone’s got different interests and different beliefs, no one’s perfect and we all have our disagreements. So it’s important to find the common ground where everyone sort of meets up. My daughter, she gets very flustered if she can’t see her doctor straight away. We say: “Look, we can’t get in to see the doctor straight away. What can we do in the meantime to support you?” We work together to try to reduce the worries she might have. We can’t always fix everything straight away. That’s not how life is, but we can do things to make it more comfortable.’

Reconnecting and repairing relationships

‘Reconnecting with each other is often about hanging in there when it’s tough. Taking small steps to find moments of calm, even just pausing and taking some deep breaths. Maybe encouraging others to do the same, and then coming back together in a really safe non-threatening way. Often not talking about it initially is best, just doing something together or even just alongside each other in the same room. And then later on, in a calm moment, you might work out what each person needs when they are upset, and agreeing to stick to what they need even if it is different to what you need. It can also be useful to make agreements that in the hard moments no one makes big statements like: “I am going to leave.”’

‘It’s a challenge to reconnect. It can be hard and painful. It can also be rewarding and healing and happy. The big part is sometimes you need help from others to reconnect with your children. It’s not always something that can be done alone. Pulling in your supports that you look up to with their way of thinking. I went to someone who I like their morals and values. She doesn’t do it for me, but helps guide me.

‘If I think of ways of reconnecting: my communication style is always changing. I’ve changed from parenting by telling her what to do, to hearing what she is saying and not shaming her by telling her what she should and shouldn’t do. Also being able to share my knowledge from what I have learned from my own experiences and my own ingrained behaviours, good or bad, and helping her navigate similar experiences by sharing these types of things with her.

‘Another big thing is living my life in a way that I want to set an example for my children. I am leading by example and that leads to connection and my kids being proud. It’s unspoken communication. Not everything has to be spoken.’

Making meaning of memories

‘My kids enjoy hearing my memories of when they were younger. The day they were born, words they said when learning to talk, even stories of when they were hurt and I helped them. They connect quickly and easily with these stories.’

‘When talking about people who have passed, I like to tell my kids positive stories about their lives and give them an idea of what that person meant to me growing up. Or funny stories, anecdotes. Little interesting things about them, and similarities. Like: “Oh you sound just like auntie Sophie” or, “you know, grandma used to do that” or, “Grandma would’ve loved that and thought that was hilarious.” Finding those connections between who the kids are now and the people that are out of their lives.’

Family can be connected even if they don’t live together

‘It can be confronting and very lonely at times to have a child not in your care. Thoughts like: “My child isn’t with me” and “my child doesn’t love me”... but when I write him a letter or see him in person, that stuff goes away. A child’s love for a parent never actually goes away. Even if it’s me writing a letter and I don’t get a response, that’s OK.

'This idea of writing a letter – not everything has to be face-to-face. Sometimes a child knowing a parent through other interactions is what is needed. Just that feeling of putting it out there, for him to know I am thinking of him. Then there are days when I purposely don't think about him, for my own mental health.'

Using the strengths you already have

'I look at these stories and that's all well and good, but that's not me, that's not the skills I have, and I don't feel shame or guilt for that.'

'What I do is I look at what my skills are: I will cook for my children, they always know when I'm feeding them that I love them. That's a way I show my love. And connecting through group messaging and having a conversation and sharing photos with my kids, that's when we all get talking.'

'And the other night my teens and I Facetimed [talked on a video call] over something really silly. It was a really fun connection, late at night and I fell asleep with my girls chatting to each other. That's the kind of family we are.'

Perhaps some of these stories gave you ideas. But for other families it's not so simple. Some parents might find a resource like [When we're really struggling to parent](#) more useful.

We think these ideas can help with showing care in our families when times are hard... what do you think?

- Which of these stories stand out to you and why?
- Do any of these stories give you ideas for your family? Which ones do you think are most important?
- What steps might you want to take next? Is there anyone or anything that could support you in taking those next steps?

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If I get sick, I sometimes sleep in Mum's bed and I feel safe. Mum will help me and that makes me feel comforted.

ARCHER, 9 YEARS OLD, KAURNA COUNTRY

Thanks for taking the time to read these stories.

- What might be missing from them?
- What things have helped your family show care for one another when you're up against it?

Dive deeper into Emerging Minds podcasts

[Growing up with a parent who experiences mental health difficulties](#) shares a young person's perspectives on the steps her family took to heal family relationships when her dad was experiencing distress.

[Staying connected to your kids while experiencing mental health difficulties](#) goes into detail about the actions a family took to maintain a dad's connection with his children while he experienced distress.

Resources to help with showing care and connection

- Raising Children has information for parents on building [positive relationships with children](#) as well as [connecting with children of different ages](#).
- Aha Parenting has resources about [fostering connection between parents and children](#). It offers practical tips and strategies for improving communication, building trust, and deepening emotional bonds within families.
- For resources and tips on connecting and communicating during mealtimes checkout [The Family Dinner Project](#). This website provides recipes, conversation starters and other activities to help families build stronger relationships around the dinner table.
- Resources for LGBTQIA+ families and their children can be found on [Rainbow Families](#).
- Emerging Minds' fact sheet [Staying connected to your children when living with mental illness](#) was developed as a guide for parents living with mental illness who have to spend some time away from their children (such as being in hospital) as part of their treatment and recovery.

More connection and belonging resources

Have a look at the following options and choose what feels right for you and your family.

- [Supporting children's social connections in tough times](#)
- [Feeling connection and belonging outside our families](#)
- [Finding connection beyond family, friends and community](#)
- [Skills for connecting through social media](#)
- [When we're really struggling to parent](#)
- [Songs for connection and belonging](#)
- [See all resources on connection and belonging](#)

Are you a practitioner wanting to share this resource with a person or family?
[First check out our practitioner guide.](#)

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